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Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Populist Leaders in Italy[1]

Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube) seem to be the key tool for accessing news in Italy. Coincidentally, they are also the key tool for communication and (internet-based) organisational aspects of two rather different populist parties (5SM and League) and their leaders, Di Maio (until January 2020) and Salvini. Salvini and Di Maio's FB pages shared contents that were not exactly analogous but still they present some similar characteristics. Among differences one can note that Salvini in contrast to Di Maio shared more frequently local content. Moreover, Salvini virtually ignored European sources. Network analysis showed that Salvini's FB page network was relatively far more extensive than Di Maio's. Interestingly, FB groups and pages sharing Di Maio's posts were rather symbolic in numbers and mainly organized as bottom-up initiatives by small groups of militants that were not directly or formally linked to the 5SM. Conversely, those FB pages and groups more prone to share Salvini's contents tended to perceive themselves as local sections of the party. Both leaders tended to share content that supported their arguments, or at least content that they could use to support their own interpretation.

Keywords: populism, Facebook, Luigi di Maio, Matteo Salvini, M5S, Lega, Italy, social media, networking

Introduction

This study focused on information sources shared on Facebook (hereinafter, "FB") by two Italian populist leaders, between April 2019 and April 2020. This report adopted as case studies the 5 Stars Movement (5SM) and the League (L) – formerly Northern League. Precisely, we analysed the FB public pages of their leaders: Luigi di Maio[2] and Matteo Salvini. The parties they lead were selected for the analysis since they are the only ones openly recognized by the academic literature as populists (Bobba and Legnante 2017; McDonnell and Bobba 2015; Tarchi 2015). However, in this respect, some differences must be specified. The League is a right-wing populist party; it's political communication is focused on blaming social outgroups (notably,

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[2]   Di Maio resigned as "capo politico" (political boss) of the 5SM on January 22, 2020. His role has been taken over by Vito Crimi. However, especially on social media like FB, Di Maio is still the leader de facto of the Movement, as well as the most influential member of 5SM in the actual Government.

non-European migrants). The 5SM instead, has a more social-inclusionist approach, focusing more on the ideals of people's participation in political decision making, and on it's moral contraposition to social and political elites. According to Vittori (2017) the 5SM is both populist and 'sovereigntist'; Coticchia and Vignoli (2020) preferred to define it as a 'left-libertarian populist party'. Assuming populism as a political communication style, the League's discourse is often described as "complete populism" (Jagers & Walgrave 2007), whilst the 5SM's one as "anti-elitism populism" (ibid.).

The 2018 Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA) dataset shows that 5SM reached 9.4 magnitude of populism on a 10 points scale. The political discourse of the movement was found to be centered on a Manichean worldview, presenting the people as an indivisible and intrinsically good entity; experts considered the 5SM as very critical against the elites, whilst supporting the idea of the importance of the general will, obtaining high scores of people centrism[3]. The League reached 8.6 degrees of populism[4]. It's ideological positioning is clearly recognised as rightist and nativist, therefore it's political communication is focused on the issues of immigration and law and order, often involving strategies of emotionalization and personalization of the political contents.

Our analysis covered three different time periods. The first period stretched from April to June 2019, capturing the *electoral period* related to the European Elections. The second was an eight months *routine period*, occurring between July 2019 and February 2020. Finally, the *Covid-19 period* goes from March to April 2020. Unlike the second period, when regional elections of Calabria and Emilia Romagna were held, in the third one all elections were postponed due to the pandemic.

In particular, this paper aims to analyse the FB networks of the pages of Di Maio and Salvini. The next section will describe the Italian political landscape, highlighting the relevance of the chosen actors and their interdependence in the Italian political arena. The following section will summarize the major findings carried out by scholars who deepened our understanding of populists' strategies when using social media for electoral campaigns and standard political communication. Another paragraph will define social media as key components of the Italian Hybrid Media System (Chadwick 2017), showing their role and their importance in nowadays political communication field. Finally, the distinctive features of the electoral campaigns conducted by the League and by the 5SM in 2018 will be presented in the last analytical section. Our findings will be described in two different parts. The Analytical Part 1 will analyze the kinds of media contents shared by the two leaders through their FB account. The focus of this section will be on the type of sources they shared, aiming to establish which media outlet populists tend to promote, whether these outlets were transparent or not, whether they were based at a national or local level, whether they were clearly politically aligned. The Analytical Part 2 will be focused mostly on networks properties. Here the networks' dimensions will be compared; finally, we will qualitatively analyze some nodes which bridge between the two networks.

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[3] https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0
[4] https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B/RMH4MI&version=2.0

Political Landscape

The Italian Constitution provides that the Government shall last five years. However, the Italian governments have usually had short duration. Since the founding of the Republic in 1948, there have been only two governments that lasted longer than three years – Berlusconi II (2001-2005) and Berlusconi IV (2008-2011)[5]. Moreover, since the 1990s, Italy has been considered as a fertile ground for populism, or even as a populist 'paradise' (Tarchi 2015). In particular, in the last decade, the entry on the scene of the 5SM with its unexpected landslide electoral results in 2013 has turned upside-down Italian politics. At its first electoral test at a national level, the 5SM obtained indeed about a quarter of the valid votes, and – 5 years later – it proved to be not a one-hit-wonder. In fact, at the 2018 general election, the party consolidated its electoral support by achieving over 33% of the votes, becoming the leading party in Italy. Although the party is going through a phase of organizational restructuring (and despite the polls signal some decline in support), the 5SM was in government across all the periods described above, remaining one of the most relevant political actors in the Italian political scenario.

Likewise, the League – after a deep organizational and ideological transformation occurred in 2018 – was able to increase its support at the polls, resulting in the most successfull party at the 2019 European Parliament Elections, with a striking 34.3% of the valid votes. The League is the most important Italian right-wing party not only according to number of its parliamentary seats, but also according to more recent polls data obtained in 2020 and 2021[6]. The other relevant rightist Italian parties are Go Italy (led by Silvio Berlusconi) and Brothers of Italy (led by Giorgia Meloni). Interestingly, Salvini represents the pure nativist heir of Berlusconi, which now seems to be shifting its party to centrist and mainstream stances (Roncarolo and Cremonesi 2019). However, according to other authors, Berlusconi, who initially was an entrepreneur entering the political field promising to run the state as a firm, now still promotes a technocratic and "soft" populism (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020). A growing number of studies depict Giorgia Meloni as populist (Campus 2020); this is also supported by POPPA's scores and measurements. The academic consensus is still not achieved, but it is likely that in the future Brothers of Italy may become a must-include party when studying Italian populism.

Hence, the League and the 5SM are the main populist political actors in Italy, and we decided to assume the two parties as case studies. It should be also noted that from June 2018 until the late summer of 2019, they even shared the government of the country (the so-called Conte I government). The government experience shared by the League and the 5SM was based on agreement between the two about a common policy manifesto. The set of policy proposals was built around the cornerstones of the two parties. Accordingly, the League was responsible for execution of policies fighting illegal immigration – in line with the anti-immigrant claims of the

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[5] Italian five longest governments from 1948 to 2016, by duration, https://www.statista.com/statistics/678886/italian-five-longest-governments-by-duration/

[6] On 5/03/2021 Euromedia Research conducted a poll about Italian's voting intentions. The League emerged as the most popularItalian party (23,6% of consensus shares), followed by the Democratic Party (18,3%) and the 5SM (14,5%). However, these data may be fluid and unstable, since one third of the sample declared to be still undecided about which party to vote, or oriented to abstain from voting. The poll is available at: http://www.sondaggipoliticoelettorali.it/ListaSondaggi.aspx

party. This was by no means unimportant public policy issue. As put by Gattinara (2017): "The so-called 'refugee crisis' marks a crucial juncture in Italian politics". Gattinara furthermore argues that other institutional and mainstream actors merely mirrored public anxieties and security claims rather than trying to actively engage with citizens' concerns. As a result, they have helped to create a fertile breeding ground for xenophobic and populist reactions, concluded Gattinara. In contrast, 5SM focused on the universal basic citizenship income and in particular on the reduction of the number of parliamentarians – in line with its populist communication, focused on anti-elitism and people-centrism.

The coalition government between the League and the 5SM ended on the initiative of Matteo Salvini, who was also Minister of Interior in that coalition government. This happened in the aftermath of the 2019 European Parliament elections, which certified a growing popular support for the League; thus, they seemingly indicated a need for a change in power leverage within the government. Salvini stated the necessity to organize a new national election, hoping to become Premier of a right-wing government. However, the political crisis was resolved with the passage of the League to the opposition and the birth of a new coalition government formed by the 5SM and the the main establishment parties: the Democratic Party and Italy Alive, a new party led by the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (see Chiaramonte, De Sio & Emanuele 2020). This government is often called Conte II, as Giuseppe Conte remained the Prime Minister.

These two governments were in charge in the periods of our research. However, it is important to underline that in January 2021 another political crisis occurred. The crisis was related to the Covid-19 pandemic management and, especially, to the economic measures needed to overcome the crisis. This situation was resolved in February 2021, when Mario Draghi became the premier of a national unity government, supported by a large coalition formed by the major Italian political parties, but Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy.

Social media and populism in Italy

There is quite extensive research on populism and communication, especially with respect to social media in Italy. In general, according to Reuters Institute (2020), Italian data signal that newspaper's readership continues to fall steadily, with a decreasing trend which is consistent with that one recorded in the previous years. Television news viewership data are instead more stable, especially when compared to other countries; television is still widely diffused in Italy, but its market shares in the telecommunication market are constantly eroded by the growing importance of social media and digital devices. Indeed, the Reuters Institute found that smartphones are the main device used to get online news. Interestingly, two-thirds of the Italians use them at least once a week to access news (Reuters Institute 2020, p. 75). At the same time, the quota of Italian citizens getting political information from untrusted sources is rising. More precisely, 52% of respondents of Reuters Institute's survey reported relying on FB for news, while about 29% use WhatsApp, and almost quarter of respondents gets information from Youtube (24%). Therefore, data regarding the trust in news are particularly low if compared to many other countries. Notably, less than 30% of the population declared to trust the news they found in the media system (this, as is discussed further, is related mainly to social media). Thus, this

macro perspective may hide the differences in trust's level associated with each component of the Hybrid Media System (Chadwick 2017).

Yet the Flash Eurobarometer 464[7] highlighted important data about trust in media outlets. The trust of Italians in traditional newspapers is lower than in the average of European countries, but it remains relatively high, since 60% of respondents declared to trust these outlets. Similarly, 56% of Italians stated they "totally trust" or "tend to trust" information broadcasted by national televisions. Only 26% of Italians trust the news they consume through social media or through messaging applications. These shares may seem low, but they must be compared to the levels of trust received by other social institutions. Another survey[8], showed that trust is scarce in the Italian context. Indeed, only 33% of the respondents declared to trust the State, only 23% the national Parliament, only 9% the political parties.

Therefore, these data depict an interesting scenario. Television is still central in Italy, distributing news to a vast public while also being trusted by them. Traditional newspapers are undergoing a crisis in revenue and readerships, but still play a pivotal role in the media system, producing highly trusted information which then spreads in the other components of the system. Finally, social media and messaging apps are more and more used, also when it comes to information and political communication. However, this growth seems to be associated with citizen's skepticism and distrust in their contents, as shown by Eurobarometer data.

These general trends in information and media consumption are actually consistent with the kind of use that populists make of social media. As stressed in previous research, social media were found to be a convenient environment for populists (Ernst et al. 2019; Enli and Rosenberg 2018; Engesser et al. 2017), and – not surprising – this kind of pattern was confirmed in Italy as well. Populist parties and their leaders have a quite prominent and effective presence on social media, and on FB in particular. Interestingly, one could also point out that to some extent the Internet and social media are crucial elements of the organizational structure of Italian populist parties. The 5SM is renowned to be born on the Internet and it fits exactly the paradigms of the digital party (Gerbaudo 2019) or 'cyber party' (Giglietto, Valeriani, Righetti & Marino 2019). 5SM is also extremely active and followed on the most important social media in the country, which is FB. For instance, the former leader of the 5SM, Luigi Di Maio, had 2.3 million fans on FB (as of 2020/2021). On the other hand, it should be also underlined that Matteo Salvini invested a lot in social media as well. More precisely, his transformation of the League was based exactly on a strategic use of social media, allowing him to put aside some of the regionalist claims that were traditionally promoted by the party, shifting towards a more nationalist-appealing message (Albertazzi et al. 2018). Remarkably, in terms of fan and engagement, Salvini is one of the most prominent politicians on FB in Europe (with 4.4M likes on his official fan page as of 2020/2021). Also, it should be pointed out that Salvini's social media communication stands out for attacking and blaming other politicians, the European Union, Italian media, and the intellectuals (e.g. Bobba and Roncarolo 2018; Bobba 2019).

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[7]   Flash Eurobarometer 464: Fake News and Disinformation Online – Detailed information on public opinion website | European Union Open Data Portal (europa.eu)

[8]   Rapporto 2020 (23°) – Rapporto gli italiani e lo stato – Demos & Pi

Populist political communication during 2018 election campaign

The electoral campaign before the 2018 general elections was marked by an intensive use of the social media (Mazzoleni 2018). The analysis by Bracciale, Andretta & Martella (2021) of digital campaigns conducted by Italian party leaders on that occasion supports the theorization of populism as a communication strategy. Thus, stylistic aspects were effective elements in engaging social media audiences. These communication features included sharing of personal feelings and moments, use of emotions, and attacks on competitors. Even if both the leaders resort to a populist communication, some differences may be found in the specific stylistic elements they implemented in their political discourse. On the one hand, Di Maio's communication was often oversimplified and centered around his charismatic figure; he was also the politician who better exploited the widespread anti-elitist feelings, harshly criticizing media, political and economic elites. Salvini preferred to center his electoral campaign and to structure his populist discourse in opposition to the migrants' outgroup.

More communicative differences were found when examining different social media. For instance, Di Maio's attacking style triggered more engagement on FB than on Twitter, and simplification best activated Salvini's audience on Twitter rather than on FB. Appeals to negative feelings clearly worked for both leaders on Twitter, such as references to charismatic leadership were effective for both Salvini's and Di Maio's Twitter audiences. Salvini induced much more engagement on FB by ostracizing immigrants, while Di Maio's critics against the elites performed better on Twitter. Therefore, the success of populist communication on social media is the result of multiple factors, including political positioning (challenger vs. incumbent), platform characteristics (demographics and uses), and the precise communication strategies which are adopted to 'perform' populism, in its various forms (Bracciale, Andretta & Martella 2021).

Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist Leaders

In this section we will analyze the types of media sources shared by populist leaders through their FB accounts. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and the level of transparency in its ownership. Our aim was twofold, since we were interested in both what was shared and ignored by populists. The analyses were carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.

In general, as shown in Figure 1, a half of links redirecting outside the leaders' FB pages was composed of digital sources, whilst newspapers account for almost another half of the sources. TV and Radio were instead pretty marginal sources. However, individually, there were significant differences. Salvini linked very much newspapers, as we will discuss further.

Moreover, it should also be noticed that as pertains to the ownership of each media content, most of the sources were found to be private (precisely, more than 95% of the sources linked by the leaders).

Figure 1: Source type
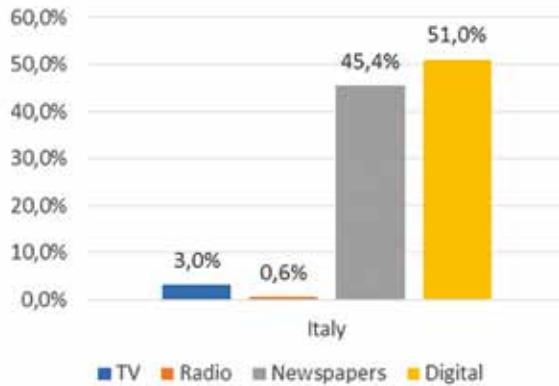
One interesting fact is that, as stressed in Figure 2, two thirds of the sources in both cases were local or national. Only a residual portion of the sources was genuinely European or supranational. One possible explanation for the relative high occurrences of local sources is that local news outlets are more likely to focus on common people's stories. Sharing them, populist leaders may present themselves as close to the people, while also achieving a greater appeal over the public on social media. Supranational sources may be instead scarce since their news may be perceived as remote and unimportant by the electors. Indeed, previous research has also underlined that events' proximity is a driving factor for engagement on FB (Salgado and Bobba 2019).

**Figure 2**: European, national and local sources
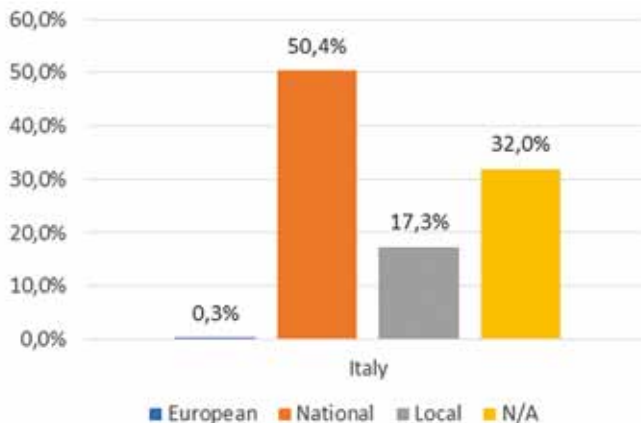
Figure 3 provides information about the ownership transparency of media outlets linked by populist political actors. Interestingly, less than 10% of the sources can be defined as fully transparent in terms of their ownership. Almost 70% of the sources linked by the two Italian leaders are indeed not entirely transparent, while about a third of the sources are non-transparent at all.

Figure 3: Source transparency
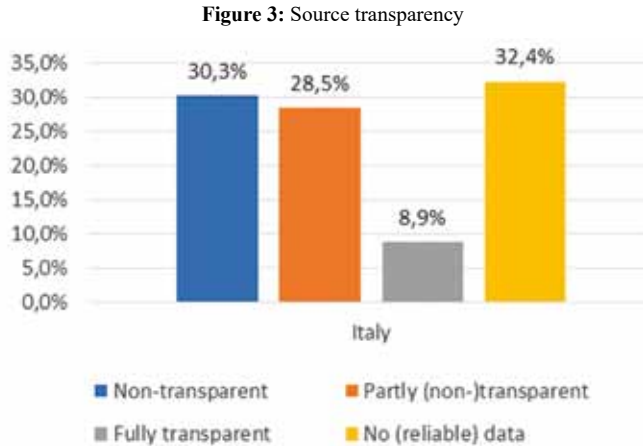
Source: Own compilation

In general, Salvini and Di Maio's FB pages share contents that are not exactly analogous but which still present some similar characteristics. As concerns the kind of source linked, figures provided in Figure 4 report that both Di Maio tends to share mainly digital sourcesm whjile Salvini shares a lot of newspapers links. TV and Radio are instead confirmed as marginal sources.

Figure 4: Source type per party leader
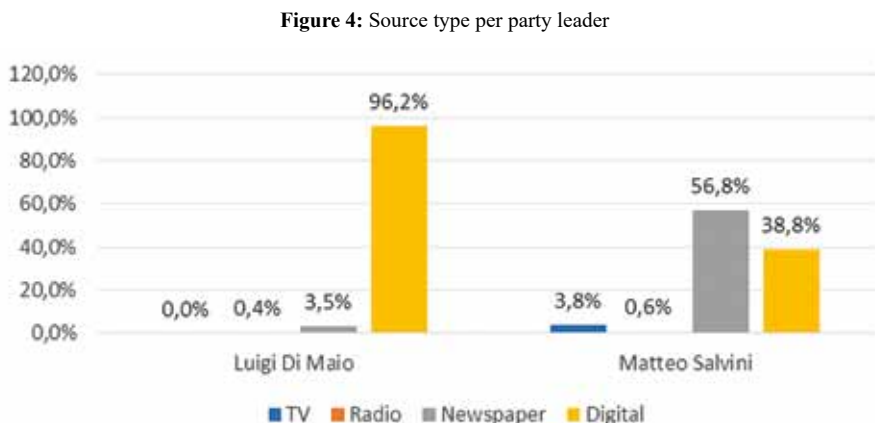
Source: Own compilation

There are similiarities between the two leaders as far as origin of sources is concerned. Figure 5 shows that in both cases sources linked are mostly national. However, while Di Maio paid some attention to European sources in addition to local issues, Salvini focused more on local issues and ignored pan-European issues. Indeed, Salvini often shared contents published by local politicians of his party, such as Lucia Borgonzoni or Donatella Tesei, or by local media (i.e. "Il Resto del Carlino"). Di Maio tended to share posts published by national media outlets, such as Ansa and Corriere della Sera. Di Maio also shared contents produced by European sources, such as those published by Piernicola Pedicini, spokesman for the movement in the European Parliament. European sources were virtually absent in case of Salvini. Therefore, the high quota of local media outlets in this list may be at least partially explained by Salvini's behaviour, which inflates this data. Perhaps, local news may be vital for his communication strategy, since they allow him to better show episodes of small criminalities, especially when committed by immigrants.

Figure 5: European, national and local sources per party leader
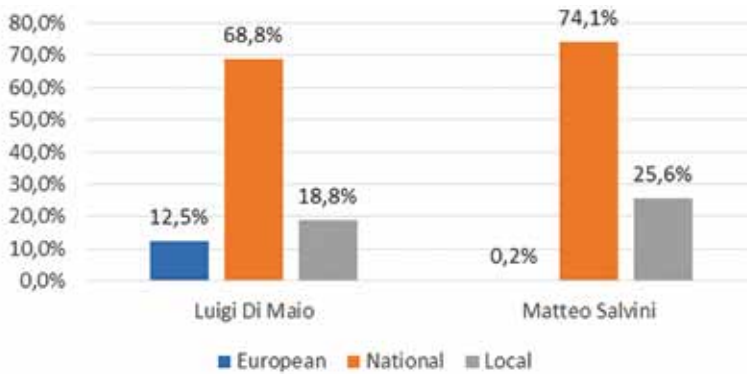
Source: Own compilation

Finally, it is generally difficult to assess a left-right ideological positioning of the sources shared by both politicians. Only 69 outlets could be clearly coded as politically aligned. Figure 6 shows that Di Maio almost exclusively shared content coming from non-ideological sources (other). On the contrary, Salvini was more prone to link centre-right, and radical right wing outlets. Di Maio often shared contents produced by other members of the 5SM, whose pages were obviously coded as post-ideological. As concerns the League's leader, indeed, we see from Figure 6 that more than one-third of the sources he shared were published by right-wing sources , such as local members of the party or politically aligned media outlets (such as "Il Giornale"). These findings show the heterogeneity of the electoral bases of the two populist parties. While the League has thrived especially in areas characterized by 'cultural backlash', as well in contexts characterized by Euroscepticism and societal malaise, the success of the 5SM can be largely explained with poor economic and institutional performances – ie. perception of bad governance (Albertazzi & Zulianello 2021).

Figure 6: Sources of political leaning
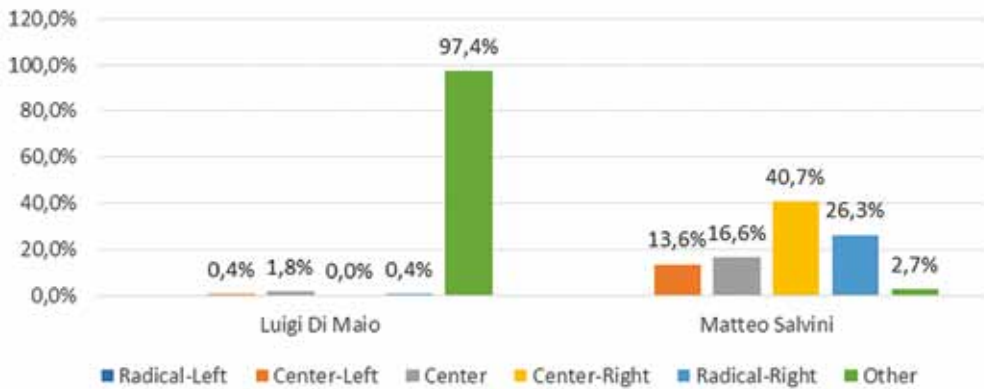
It is worth mentioning that a qualitative analysis of the sources revealed that both Salvini and Di Maio's pages shared contents published by the same outlets, which emerged as extremely popular in Italy. In particular, they both share *ansa.it,* which is the main press agency in Italy, and *Corriere.it*, one of the most relevant newspapers in Italy. This finding was also supported by the network analysis, which will be better described in the next section.

Electoral vs. non-electoral coverage, event vs. regular

The qualitative analysis shows that there were no remarkable differences in the distribution and nature of the sources in different periods. The two leaders did not change their social media activity nor the kind of sources linked during the three different periods covered by our analyses. However, during the third phase, characterized by the advent of the pandemic, the Covid-19 issue monopolized the attention of both Salvini and Di Maio. Here politicians in government, opposition parties and news broadcasters, were under pressure, struggling to portray themselves as key players in the public arena; what they all wanted to avoid was to be perceived as self-interested actors harming the interest of the society at large (Newell 2020).

Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts

In this section we will examine several aspects. First, whether there were disproportions between the dimensions of the two networks generated by the leaders' pages (ex. one much bigger than other). Second, network reciprocity – the degree of interconnection between different pages in the networks. Third, the degree of centrality of each node within its network. Finally, we were interested to learn which pages were the connectors between the two networks, and if there was reciprocal sharing of information. Local research (Giglietto, Valeriani, Righetti & Marino 2019)

suggested that on Twitter, sources mainly shared by supporters of 5SM and the League were characterized by higher levels of insularity compared to those shared by supporters of other parties. Moreover, on FB, news items published by highly insular sources received a higher number of shares per comment.

Focusing on the structure of the network derived from the FB public pages of the two leaders, it emerges with great evidence that Salvini's page network is far more vast than Di Maio's. Also, as shown in Figure 7, the two pages do not seem to overlap that much. In this respect, the only exception is represented by the FB page of the "Corriere della Sera" page. As mentioned above, this is not surprising, since the "Corriere" is one of the main newspapers in Italy in terms of readership, and it is also one of the most followed Italian FB pages.

Figure 7: the structure of the network
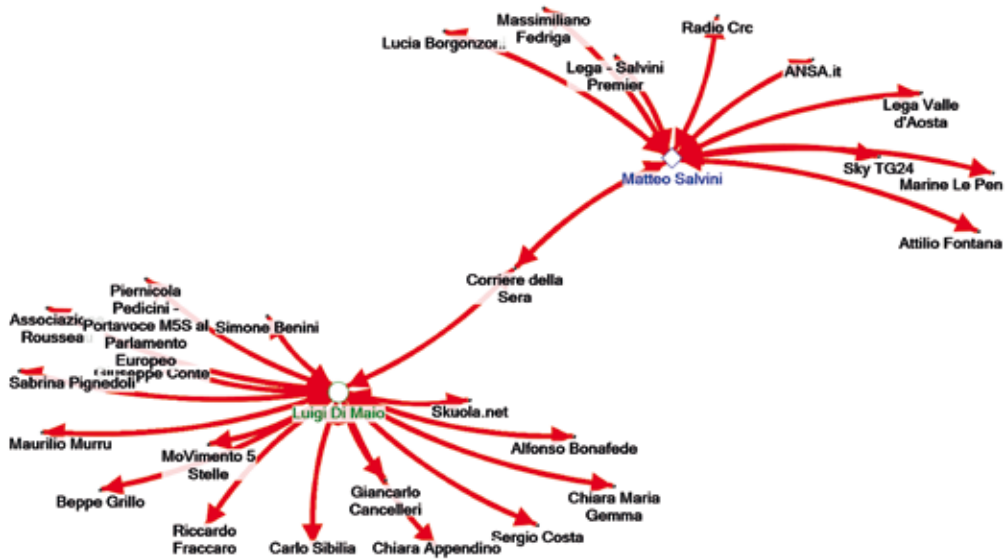
Source: Marincea, 2020

All in all, the two networks are quite big. As mentioned above, this is not a surprising output, since the two FB pages are similar in terms of engagement and they are both particularly prominent within the Italian FB. During the analyzed periods, Di Maio's contents have been shared by about 530 public pages, while this quota is even higher for Salvini: over 680 shared his contents (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Content Sharing
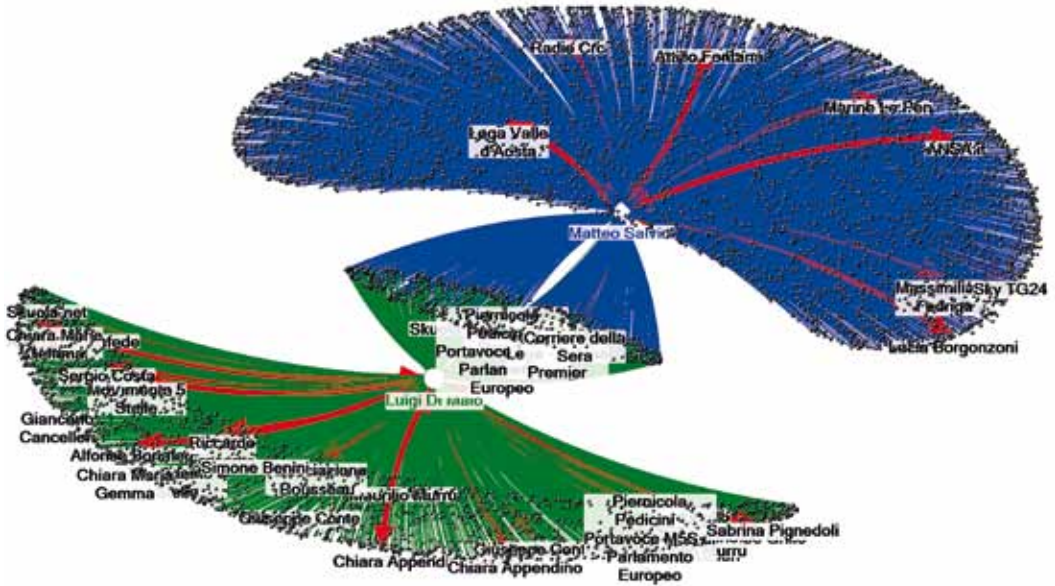
Source: Marincea, 2020

As expected, for both Di Maio and Salvini the pages more active in sharing their contents were precisely fan pages directly linked to the leader or its party. For instance, we catalogued the FB pages called "5 STAR MOVEMENT – LET'S GOVERN ITALY" (for what concerns Di Maio) and "SALVINI PREMIER" (for Salvini) as well as many others with similar names. A qualitative analysis of these pages shows that groups and pages sharing Di Maio's posts were mainly organized as bottom-up initiatives by small groups of militants that were not directly or formally linked to the 5SM. Conversely, those pages and groups more prone to share Salvini's contents tended to perceive themselves as local sections of the party. More detailed analyses revealed that the number of pages sharing contents from both the two leaders were few in absolute number. Indeed they were just 32 and they can be defined as generic populist aggregations in which – probably – the two "souls" of the former Conte I government remained intertwined, now spamming one against each other.

Conclusions

Initially, this paper described the Italian political landscape and presented the main Italian political parties. Among them, the League and the 5SM were selected as case studies in order to study two actors unanimously recognized as populists. Our research focused on the FB pages of their leaders – Salvini and Di Maio – examining their FB networks. We analysed both the

contents shared by them and the FB pages which shared their posts, in a time span stretching between April 2019 and April 2020. Then, the relevance of FB within Italian's Hybrid Media System was discussed. Social media users are increasing, but survey data show that FB and messaging apps are still perceived as a source of low quality information, vastly untrusted by citizens. Therefore, legacy media (such as newspapers and television) retain their importance and market shares. The paper also investigated the role of social media in populists' political communication. FB emerged as central in their strategies, allowing them to structure their political discourse with decreased constraints. This phenomenon was highlighted in relation to the 2018 general election campaign.

Being the numbers of engagement quite large, there are no big surprises in the analysis of the network of the two FB pages, nor in terms of what the FB pages share. Salvini's network proved to be larger than Di Maio's, although not in a particular accentuated way. The two FB pages seemed to have a quite differentiated audience that interact and debate very rarely, or in very small and peripheral situations. Salvini and Di Maio used news sources to sell their arguments and topics, it was thus not important the source from which they derived the story, but rather the interpretation that the two leaders gave to the same fact. A signal of this is the fact that both the leaders tended to share posts published by the most important press agency and newspaper in Italy (ANSA and Corriere della Sera). It is important to underline that even if FB provides politicians a tool to immediately dialogue with their electoral bases, political leaders still use the platform to vinculate news produced by professional journalism. Therefore, even if the political system is now able to interact with citizens without the intermediation of the legacy media, political leaders, especially Salvini, still partially rely on legacy media when communicating with their audiences. Indeed, our analyses showed that more than half of the external links shared by Salvini redirected towards newspapers websites. This may be explained examining trust data. As discussed above, Italians trust in the media is strikingly low when compared to other European countries. However, aggregated data tends to hide the differences among each media which compose nowadays Hybrid Media System. In this regard, it is important to specify that Italian's trust in the newspapers is certainly low, but it is still higher than Italian's trust in social media. Moreover, Italian political actors (i.e. political parties and political leaders) and social institutions are often trusted by less than 20% of the citizens. Therefore, when redirecting to newspaper websites, political leader is sharing news products which are more likely to be believed than a FB post written by a common FB user or by an official communication produced by a certain political institution. Low trust scores obtained by Italian politicians may force them to re-intermediate their political communication using legacy media as precious intermediaries, exploiting their credibility. Their communication strategy is precisely to frame a news product in the way which is more likely to be positively perceived by their electors.

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